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THE  
AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY'S  
**Committee on Versions**  
AND ITS NEW BIBLE.

BY ROBERT J. BRECKINRIDGE, D. D.

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It appears to me to be my duty to make a public statement, touching the relation of the American Bible Society to our common English Bible, and touching my relations to that question. For the part I have acted, has been made the pretext for assailing me in a manner the most virulent, and manifestly concerted and carried on for the purpose of creating a public sentiment to support a foregone conclusion in the bosom of that Society. A man at my time of life, and who has lived for more than thirty years, very much before the public, may indeed be presumed to have acquired a character of some sort, which can maintain a positive existence not only against anonymous malignity, but against the malevolence even of respectable names. I have, therefore, remained silent for five months under a personal attack upon me, in conjunction with the Rev. Dr. Adger, for what we did in the late General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, gratuitously made by the Rev. Dr. Leland in a letter to the *New York Observer*. And the still more unbecoming personal attack more recently made upon me, in conjunction with the Rev. Dr. Hodge, by the Rev. Dr. Vermilye, of the Dutch Reformed Church, in a publication in the *Christian Intelligencer*, seems to me equally unworthy of any personal consideration by me. So far as this publication of Dr. Vermilye assails the character, spirit, and aim of the whole Presbyterian Church in the United States, or any considerable portion of it; I am content to leave him and them face to face, and to abide the

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judgment of mankind between them. So far as he assails our Professors of Theology in general, or any special portion of them, or me in particular, as being actuated by jealousy because we have not been allowed to share the glory of mutilating the English Bible, in conjunction with Dr. Robinson and himself; I take leave to assure him, that if any single competent Professor of Theology in any Presbyterian Seminary had chanced to be associated with himself and Dr. Robinson, their butchery of our English Bible would have resulted very differently. And so far as his publication may be taken as a revelation of himself, it is perfectly conclusive of his own unfitness to be one of two persons, no matter who the other may be, whose emendation of our common English Bible, under a usurped authority, the Christian public shall be bound to receive and endorse unquestioned.

The conduct on my part, which has subjected me to so many attacks, was simple and direct, was wholly official, and was, as it appears to me, perfectly unavoidable. I was aware of what the Committee on Versions of the American Bible Society had done: I utterly disapproved it: I found myself a member of the General Assembly of my Church in May, 1857, without any procurement of mine: I was made Chairman of the Committee of that body to which the consideration of such questions belonged, by the Moderator against my inclination: I found no one else prepared to bring forward a matter of such vast importance, but found a readiness of mind both in the large Committee, and in that great Assembly itself, to entertain the matter; and I drew up and submitted to the Committee, and afterwards discussed in the Assembly, a few brief, respectful, decisive resolutions, covering the case as made between the Committee on Versions, with the connivance of the Managers, and the Christian public; which resolutions, in effect, denied all power in the Bible Society to do what its Committee had done, and its Board of Managers had connived at, manifested the strongest desire that what had been done should be undone, and intimated clearly that the Presbyterian Church would not agree that the Society should either change its constitution or usurp the most dangerous powers, never rested in it. Of course, I have no idea of apologizing for my part of this conduct, to the Bible Society, or to its Committee, or to any assailant, known or unknown. I surely desire the Christian public to know, and to bear in mind, exactly what the conduct was,

on the part of a free Presbyterian minister, in his place, and in his lot, which gave such mortal offense. And perhaps, nothing could more clearly prove that the time and the place had fully come, for the simple and fearless word to be distinctly spoken. If learned doctors, and unknown scribes, are of opinion that God erred in the man he chose to speak that word; thus far at least they have my sympathy, that I no more expected or sought to be called to it, than they expected or desired it of me.

What I said in the Assembly, was in the presence of nearly three hundred of my colleagues—in the presence of one of the Secretaries of the Bible Society, (Rev. Dr. McNeal)—in the presence of a number of persons who were or had been officially connected with that Society—in the bosom of a great audience, made up exclusively of the friends of that Society. What I did is matter of record. What I may have been reported in various papers to have said, I cannot tell; for I, probably, never saw one in ten of those papers, and I never read over the half of the brief reports that fell under my eye. I prepared nothing for the press; I have taken no public action of any sort, from the breaking up of the Assembly to the meeting of the Synod of Kentucky, of which I am a member, nearly five months afterwards. Perhaps I erred, in this inactivity—while the most effective means were being taken by those claiming to act in the immediate interest of the Society, to make a case against those who called in question what its Committee had done. To make a case, I repeat, by traducing those who uttered any scruples, falling upon them by concert, in publications of all sorts, and in all quarters of the country; and by diligently collecting funds throughout the country, as a proof that the public mind was still satisfied: the Board of Managers of the Society, meantime, remaining profoundly silent, as to its future course; so that when our next Assembly should meet, and take up the minute which I offered in the late Assembly, and which it referred to the next; the aspect of the case would be, that the agitators were written down—that the Christian public had responded favorably, that the matter was triumphantly with the Sub-Committee of the Committee on Versions, (namely with Dr. Vermilye and Dr. Robinson)—that the Common English Version was properly altered—and that the new standard Bible of the Sub-Committee is a finality.

It is as foreign from my nature to stand idly by, and allow great

interests to be controlled by indirect and unjustifiable means, as it is to resort to such means myself. I had done all that it seemed to me a Christian gentleman, situated as I was, could do, both in private conversation and by correspondence, with some of the most estimable and influential persons immediately connected with the Society, and with others of great distinction known to be warm friends of it and not opposed to what had been done in its name. I had sought thus, to ascertain what course the Board of Managers was inclined to take; I had urged it to take some course that would restore confidence to the public mind; and at least to make up its decision without delay and announce it clearly. In all this I so far failed, that, at the end of five months from the adjournment of our late Assembly, I have nothing better than conjecture as to what the Board of Managers will do. In the meantime, the objectionable edition of the Bible, made a standard by Dr. Vermilye and Dr. Robinson, with the concurrence of the Committee on Versions, and the connivance of the Board of Managers, was, as far as the public knew, going into wider and wider circulation; collections that might be pleaded as proof of public approbation were pressed by agents of the Society every where; and a simultaneous assault through the press was made upon all opposers in general, upon the Presbyterian Church in particular, and upon Dr. Hodge and myself with special emphasis. It seemed to me that the time had fully come, for the friends of the Bible as it is, to speak once more; and no plan seemed to me more fit, than in the bosom of the venerable Synod of Kentucky. That court of Christ has spoken as became it; in the strong hope that the Bible Society will correct the intolerable errors committed in its name; in the fixed purpose if this is denied, to find a remedy, or make one.

I have, from the moment I was made aware of this movement for a new standard Bible, entertained a settled conviction that the Presbyterian Church would never consent to it. This is still my fixed belief; and it seems to me that all the proof in the case points most emphatically in that direction. What may be gained by the Society's pursuing a course which will force that church to prove that a more scholarly and thorough evangelism in the committee of that Society is indispensable to the permanent security of an uncorrupted English version, I am content to leave to the meditation of the learned Doctors and the unknown scribes, who have taken that So-

ciety under their special protection. Supposing I am not warranted in my confidence of the resolute purpose of the Presbyterian Church to have the old English Bible, and not the Bible of the sub-committee of the Committee on Versions, of the Bible Society, then a very grave question arises, not only for the Bible Society, but for all the Protestant churches: Does any one suppose that a question of conscience touching the integrity of the word of God, can be given up by Christian people even to avoid trouble in the church of God, much less trouble with a secular society? Can there be a doubt that it is impossible for the Bible Society to carry through this new standard edition of their new sub-committee, without producing results some of which may prove fatal to its character, and some of which may prove, in more ways than one, fatal to its existence? Is it worth while for it to cast off whole denominations? Is it worth while for it to oblige even large portions of denominations to resort to new methods of printing and circulating the Bible? Is it worth while for it to create a new standard English Bible, with no result so certain as a profound agitation, perhaps schism, in our American Protestantism.

Not the least remarkable feature of this unhappy business is, the utterly absurd pretensions which persons acting in purely secular offices assume over the Sacred Scriptures, and the insolence with which they rebuke the church of God for its fidelity to its Divine Lord, and to the souls of men, in one of its own precise functions. The word of God is, next to the Spirit itself, the most precious gift of Christ to his church; and if the church has any clear duty upon earth, one duty is to preserve that Divine Word in purity. But here is a society purely secular and voluntary, having no function concerning the English Bible by its constitution or its charter, but to circulate it; and here are its managers, its committee, and its sub-committee; and here is a new standard English Bible, changed from the old one, no one can tell how extensively, but so far as we can understand official statements, *possibly* in somewhere about twenty-four thousand particulars, more or less important, in which we are told they have discovered and recorded variations in the text and punctuation alone. And now because certain branches of the church of Christ, shocked at such proceedings, manifest a disposition to throw the weight of their influence against such monstrous doings of a committee of seven persons, and a sub-committee of

two, an outcry is raised as if the committee and sub-committee of this secular Society were acting by express divine authority, and the churches of Christ were mere intruders in meddling with the oracles of God.

The Committee of Versions state officially that they have made alterations in the text of the common English Bible in *nine* particulars, to-wit: in words, in orthography, in proper names, in compound words, in capital letters, in words in italics, in punctuation, in parentheses, and in brackets. They also state officially that they have made alterations in *five* particulars, in what they call accessories of the text, to-wit: in the contents of the chapters, in the running-heads of the columns, in the marginal readings, in the marginal references, and in the chronology—that is, having discovered and recorded about twenty-four thousand variations in the English text and punctuation alone, they have “seen fit,” as they express it, to adopt changes both in the text and its accessories, under the fourteen heads above cited from their own report to the Board of Managers of the American Bible Society. And so far back as 1851 they state that the plates had been finished, and editions of the Bible carried through the press, with all their changes. And then they distinctly assert, that of all these twenty-four thousand variations in the text and punctuation, which had been discovered and recorded, “*there is not one which mars the integrity of the text, or affects any doctrine or precept of the Bible.*” The plain sense of the whole taken together would be this: Here are certain persons who have been employed and who have been engaged to *circulate* a particular version of the Word of God: they do so for thirty years, and then on their own motion proceed to discredit the version they were employed to circulate, and say they have succeeded in discovering and recording twenty-four thousand errors: they then make their success in discrediting it the ground of altering it under fourteen different heads, which extend even beyond these sources of error, and by means of which it seems unquestionable that they may have made more changes in the text and its accessories, than they profess to have discovered errors in the text and its punctuation: they then declare that all those twenty-four thousand errors discovered by them are absolutely immaterial, as to every doctrine and every precept of the Bible—which is far more than they can declare truly about their own emendations: and they wind up the case with con-



sidering their employers under some sacred and mysterious obligation to ratify what they have done. Now I am bold to say, that if all this had been done with regard to the works of Milton or Shakespeare, it would have been considered an unprecedented act of literary folly, arrogance and bad faith. Can it be conceived to be possible that the Christian public will endure it, when it is perpetrated on a version of the Sacred Scriptures, which has given fixation to the noblest language and literature on earth ; which is the highest bond between the greatest nations in the world, and which is the power of God unto salvation to the most numerous and devoted portion of the followers of the Lamb? Surely this cannot be.

Now our plea is, that this entire procedure, from beginning to end, is wholly gratuitous, unwarranted, and intolerable. That the Bible Society has no authority, no call, no need, no fitness, for any such work. That no single denomination of Christians, of all those united in using its agency for circulating the common English Bible, ever did, ever could, or probably ever would have conferred upon it any such honor. And that the whole affair is a most cruel mistake, which ought to have been corrected the moment it was observed : to persist in which will be a most flagrant outrage, incapable of defense in morals, and capable of a redress both through public sentiment, and at law, fatal to the Society.

Our farther plea is, that the principles on which the procedure has been undertaken and carried through, are perilous in the highest degree. That the results reached are evil, and only evil. That the persons who did the work, are manifestly incompetent to such a work as they undertook without any lawful call. That the Christian public has treated them with the greatest forbearance. That the time is rapidly passing away, when the error which has been committed will be capable of complete redress by the American Bible Society. And that the Board of Managers of that Society, as yet implicated apparently not much farther than that it has connived at what has been done, and has not yet prevented it, is called upon by the highest considerations to allay the profound disquietude for which it is itself responsible, to avert the peril which hangs over our common Protestantism, and to retrieve its own grand position as our common agent in circulating the Word of God.

For myself, personally, I may be allowed to say, that no man lives who has more cordially co-operated, in my humble way, with the

American Bible Society, than I have done ; none who is less disposed to note its endurable mistakes, or who will more heartily rejoice to be allowed to promote its proper work in future. No man lives who could have been less personally inclined to do what God has shut me up to do in this sad business, from first to last; or who would more eagerly embrace some middle term, if any could be found, at once safe and just. As it is, I see but three possible alternatives. Fatal injury to the Society, if it maintains the action of its Committee, and the Christian conscience is as enlightened as I believe it to be : endless confusion in the churches, if the Society persists in the course marked out by its Committee, and the Christian conscience is not as enlightened as I think it is : peace, and a higher and brighter career before the Society, if grace and wisdom are given to its managers to undo the evil which has been done by their authority, and to confine themselves to their own great work. And I think I can confidently assert, that all I have said and done, publicly and privately, accords with this. But if the Bible Society sees fit to place me in a position, where my duty as a Christian, as a Protestant, as a minister of Christ, as a scholar, and as one of the vast English-speaking population of the world, appears to me to oblige me to condemn and oppose it, no one, I suppose, would expect me to hesitate.

RO. J. BRECKINRIDGE.

DANVILLE, KY., *October 30, 1857.*

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